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The Earthquake To Carlos Monsiváis

ELENA PONIATOWSKA

Professor, the earth is quaking.

I saw my workmate Virginia run and lean against a wall, the building was a giant wave, it began to groan, I stood in the doorway, the building was crumbling down. Then the wall where Virginia was standing split and fell on top of her. I covered my head with my briefcase, and I began to fall down, and at that moment, I said: "Goddammit, why am I going to die, I haven't done anything!" Everything became dark, I fell kind of stretched out, on the ground, I was completely buried, I hardly had any room to move in, but I found a small can and I began to bang it again and again, banging it against the floor, again and again; I could move my arm and I yelled for more than a quarter of an hour: "Help! Come and get me out of here!" and I continued yelling all alone and banging the can again and again, until I saw a ray of sunlight but about thirty meters away. Then I said: "This is my salvation."

Crawling, holding my head like this, my whole body moves towards that hole. It was a small slit, just about this big, I could barely get my hand through it. I couldn't get out. I turned slightly, this way and that, to see if I was all right, I found my body, I checked it and I began to fight with my shoulders, my arms, my head, to push with all my strength; so what if I cut my head, my forehead, my arms, that didn't matter at all . . . not a bit . . . I kept on and on, like a person banging his head against a wall, and I have a good hard head, strong, the bones like iron and I opened the hole little by little. Even if I went bald, I was going to open that hole; and I widened it enough to pull my body

out through it. Only then did I speak again. I don't usually say bad words, but I said: "That was fucking hard." I saw that the eight story building had squashed to one floor. I yelled: "Virginia! Virginia!" I yelled "Virginia" a lot, I yelled "Virginia! Virginia!" for hours. She didn't answer—well, she's dead.

Then I remembered my workmate, Javier Garnica, a draftsman, who also used to come in early and I began to shout through the rubble:

"Javier!"

"What?"

I said: "You're alive!"

(Later I thought, "Boy, am I dumb, why am I telling him that he's alive, if he's answering me it's because he's alive.")

"Don't worry, friend", I yelled at him, "I'm going to get help, to come and get you out."

On the street, gas was escaping from an enormous tank.

These are the words of Alonso Mixteco. He is an Indian. He comes from two Indian cultures: Nahuatl on his mother's side, and Mixteco on his father's side. He came to Mexico from his native state, Guerrero, to work in the *Dirrección General de Educación Indígena* (General Office for Indian Education). He not only became the "man who came out alone", but he also went back to the building to rescue his workmates:

We the people of the underclass are always out of everything. I feel that all people like me could be referred to as "third class". The ones who got the worst part on Thursday the 19th and Friday the 20th of September were the poorest ones.

Another thing I want to say is that here you get desperate from all the red tape, all the paperwork, all the bureaucratic forms that have to be filled in, paper and more paper, and now all the papers flew through the air! Absolutely nothing was left, the earthquake blew it all away.

Mexico City is the largest city in the world: 18 million inhabitants. The majority come from the countryside to live miserably in the poverty belts; some of them are able, after a few years, to find a place to live in the social welfare housing units. One of these, the *Nuevo León* building in the Tlatelolco apartment complex, collapsed. Salomon Reyes, the building's superintendent and parking lot watchman saw how the building twisted and fell, split in two, collapsed in on itself:

The first thought that came to me was of my children and my wife Josefina. All seven of them were waiting for her because she'd gone out to get the milk for their breakfast. All nine of us lived in a room

on the roof of the building. My children, my children, my God, there was only a creaking sound and then the building bent in on itself and completely collapsed and black smoke and dust covered the sky.

I ran towards the building and I climbed on top of the rubble, I began digging with my hands and after several days I was desperate and I went to the shelters, children's centers, hospitals, but since I can't read, I couldn't understand the lists that were taped on the doors. I found a lady who said: "I don't know how to read either, so I pray." The nurses didn't even listen to me, I know it's because they are in such a hurry, because they're nervous—"there's no one here by that name"—and so I kept walking from hospital to hospital.

I wore out my shoes; my wife got pretty sick and they had to tie her to the bed because she tried to kill herself; she shook and shook all over. Of course, all of this is hard to bear, very hard but I'm mad at her because I feel bad too and she hasn't helped me at all. Can you imagine, I lost my children, my house, my job, everything. My kids were doing well in school and sure, it felt nice because, Daddy, look at my grades, Daddy, look at my notebook; darn, it made you feel good, look at what the teacher wrote here at the top of the page, but, what did it all come to? From having a big family, seven kids, good students, to not having one. I had the hope of finding at least one, at least having one.

"When I heard on the radio that the *Nuevo Leon Building* had fallen", says Consuelo Romo, a fat woman, strong, big, with a wide brown face,

I came to Mexico all the way from Mazatlán. I hitched rides on trucks because my daughter and three grandchildren had come to Mexico on vacation, to stay with my sister who lived in the *Nuevo León*. I spent a whole week in front of the *Nuevo León* in Tlatelolco, without wanting to sleep, without being able to eat, hugging a tree, waiting for them to rescue my family.

I saw all around me the other desperate mothers, people who waited and then a girl came up to me and said: "Why not help a little? Why don't you help me distribute this water?" Then I started handing out the water to those who waited for their relatives just like me, to the volunteers, to the people who were working, to the soldiers. Then they had me distribute the food. I'm strong. I can lift things. I continued with the same hope as the others that they would find my family; I still had the hope of their being found alive in some little hole. I still had hope when I was distributing the water, the days passed, and no, hope was no longer possible. I lost the only thing I had, the only thing, only them, I had no one else, only them, I was left completely alone.

I cried by myself and I served the food while I cried; somebody had to do it and I'm fat and I could carry the pot of rice. Mr. Placido Domingo saw me and after a few days he made me Coordinator of Volunteers; he gave me a card that said "Coordinator;" I have it folded in my apron.

Into that job I put all my love, everything in me so that I could help. I knew what all the other people felt because I was feeling it myself; the others were as torn as I was. Then I put more and more and more love into being a volunteer; I threw myself into the volunteer work, I came and went, I did things, I carried, so as not to feel, I carried, gave out, prepared food, heated water, served coffee, uncapped sodas, I did everything. I swept, cleared away things, threw away garbage, carried stones.

The only one they found after a long time, in the last few days, was my granddaughter; she was at the bottom in the building's pit that was full of water. They didn't let me see her; the smallest of the three. They never found the others, never.

I have put so much love into this work that everybody loves me now, they call me "star volunteer", very pretty things—they say that I'm their old lady, they call me mama, they call me aunt, they've written me letters: "Chelito, you're not alone, you have too many friends, I feel as if I were your sister." One of the volunteers gave me a card that says: "This is for you, if you throw it away, you love me, if you tear it up, you adore me, if you keep it, you want to marry me, if you give it away, you like me and if you give it back to me it's because you want to kiss me, if you fold it, you love me tenderly. Tell me, my love, how are you going to get out of this?" He's a young man who does it just so I won't feel so bad.

As head of the volunteers, Doña Consuelo organizes the volunteer squad members; she's very good at putting up tents. With her hands on her hips, she gives instructions: "You're going to put the plastic like that, the top goes over here, you tie it down with rope, good and tight, you fasten it down good, pulling on it hard, these camping tents are guaranteed against downpours." She takes the volunteer workers up to the building and she shows them how to use a pick and shovel and how to tear things down. She calls a volunteer who is dragging his shovel: "Come and wash your hands so you can eat your sandwich, take off your safety helmet, that way you'll cool off." Just the sound of her voice is comforting; as much as the chipped wash basin where the volunteers wash their hands clean, hands that belong to clean men, while Doña Chelo holds a rag that serves as a towel and says, finally, with infinite weariness: "Go on, son, go back to your work."

We arrived at the Social Security's baseball stadium, known as the Delta Park, and just seeing it made my throat close up. We got all the stuff out of the van, the formaldehyde, the drums of disinfectant, the dry ice, the fumigators. Then I saw the stadium. It was as if we were in the middle of a play, but with no spectators because all the bleachers were empty, the center of the arena was brightly lit, and the actors

below, in the center of the stage—but the actors were dead. In the back there stood three huge plastic tents, also brightly illuminated by the fieldlights, with signs saying: “Unidentified Bodies”, the first; another read “Identified Bodies”; and the third, “Remains”—remains in plastic bags that I never wished to see and thank God never had to see. These small plastic bags were treated with the same care and respect as the bodies that were whole.

People would go in to get the remains.

As a defense mechanism, I began to feel as if I were watching a movie. The smell of formaldehyde was very strong. At the entrance could be heard the clatter of a typewriter of the employees of the District Attorney’s Office, who were filling in death certificates. From the trucks they brought down bundles and more bundles; those bundles were bodies.

The first thing we did was to cordon off an area through which people couldn’t pass without being fumigated. It was called a sanitary carpet, because by then the men, women, and children had been dead for three and four days, there were some pretty advanced stages of putrefaction.

We set down a roll of plastic on the ground to act as a barrier, so that two of us there could spray those that went in or came out with formaldehyde: the stretcher bearers, the relatives and the pall bearers.

The doctor ordered us: “Go fumigate the bodies.”

Fortunately, I didn’t have to do it the first time or the second, it wasn’t until about the third time. At a distance of almost twenty meters you could see the plastic bags, the dry ice and the heaps, but those heaps badly covered with plastic were the bodies. The spray machine shot out the formaldehyde with such force that it lifted up the plastics: “I don’t want to look.” There were three of us fumigating and suddenly I thought: “I have to force myself to look because I could cause some problem for the other two I’m with if I don’t look in the right direction. Death is part of life and I have to force myself to look.” The first thing that I was a tall girl lying on the ground, very white, her body was full of bruises, completely naked, her pubis had been shaved and she had very large breasts, full of milk. I noticed that she had a cut in the shape of a half moon on her womb and it made me very sad to realize that she had just had her child; her womb had not been barren. She was so pale, her body looked like an abused statue. “Well, why did you have to die?”

So I began a dialogue with the dead. I sprayed and talked to myself while talking to them. I asked them, why? I saw a fat woman with a very cheap cloth dress. I saw many of them. I felt a great sense of shame, I told them out loud: “I have no right to be looking at you with your dress up, I have no right to see you naked, I have no right to look at you.” I saw dark bodies, blackened, and at a certain point, I began repeating to myself: “These are nothing anymore, they are not human any longer.” I repeated it to myself many times as if to protect myself: “This is only organic matter, these flattened arms, these tumified faces,

these protruding tongues, they're only organic matter, there's a lot of bacteria here and I have to stop them from spreading, that's why I'm fumigating."

I suddenly turned and to my left saw a little girl with her eyes wide open in a smile that was like a broken grimace, an eight year old girl: "Little girl, why didn't you run? Why did a beam fall on you?" All the time, I kept talking to the bodies with the insistence that was filled with hate, rage, anger: "It's not fair. It's not fair that in this country the hospitals, the schools, the government buildings, the public offices collapse; it's not fair that it should always hit the poorest people, the most deprived."

All the volunteers could feel the cold in their legs because of the dry ice and the smell of formaldehyde. Besides we were scared. Maybe at first we were scared of being contaminated, but then we realized that we, the ones who were spraying the formaldehyde, were the most protected ones.

A short, dark, skinny fellow came in, he was the typical Mexican who has to work real hard, who probably lives in a tenement in some miserable slum, wearing a sweater that was much too thin, damn, our people are so unprotected, I mean really, how forsaken they are, it makes you really angry to see them like that, so deprived.

"The boxes . . .", he asked. There were three boxes for him. The coffins. He wanted to know if he had to pay for them. What could the poor man possibly pay with?

"Have you identified your relatives?"

"Yeah, they're there. But what about the boxes?"

"No, the boxes are free; we'll give them to you right away. Did you come alone?"

He had come for the bodies of his sister and two nieces, one was fourteen, the other nine, I felt really bad. I'm too much of a coward, but I couldn't help him with his relatives, I didn't have the strength to. I said: "I'm sorry but I can't." A fat worker from the University said: "Gosh man, it scares me a lot; it's not revulsion, it's fear, but I feel sorry for the guy, I'll help him, just spray me real well with the formaldehyde", and he went with the skinny guy.

While he went to get the bodies, we, Claudia, Giovanna, and I prepared the coffins and I realized that one of them had two iron nails sticking out, but I said: "Too bad, doesn't matter anyway." Later we saw how the little guy was trying to flatten the nails with his tennis shoe and when he wasn't able to we saw him bending the nails with a board, and with that sole act he gave back all human dimension to the bodies. I had thought that the only real things were the bacteria, but for the skinny guy, even though his bodies were torn apart, they were still his kin and they had the right not to be hurt by the nails. The fat guy helped him place the bodies in the coffins and we had to sprinkle them with lime. We asked people for permission to do so:

"Would you allow us to sprinkle the body with lime?"

I asked the skinny little fellow: "Hey, will you let me sprinkle with

lime?"

"Yes."

We had to put the fourteen year old girl in an adult coffin because she didn't fit in the smaller one and when I began to sprinkle the lime on her, I remembered—it's really pathetic—Hamlet. At a certain point in the play, when Ophelia, having gone mad, drowns, and Hamlet's mother sprinkles violets on her and thinks: "Behold, I come to spread on your grave the flowers that I had wanted to put on your wedding bed." I had exactly the same sensation: "I am sprinkling lime on you, little girl, so that you can go all in white, but you'll be white because of the lime. You didn't live at all, little fourteen year old girl, you look all white"; with all those associations of purity, and dignity and being untouched, of all that, I couldn't sprinkle more than a little bit of lime on her.

This was narrated by Professor Lazcano Araujo, founder of the course "Origins of Life," in the *UNAM*, the National University of Mexico, and volunteer worker since the 20th of September. He lived this experience on Sunday, the 22nd of September, in the Social Security Stadium, from 10 PM to 4 AM at which time he left with nine other volunteers in the same van with the drums of disinfectant now empty, the door left open because of the unbearably irritating smell of the formaldehyde that had impregnated their lab coats, surgical caps, and masks.

On Thursday, the 19th, I came to the Red Cross to help in what way I could. I got this terribly injured man, I went up to him and he could barely see with one eye, he was about sixty five years old and I took his hand in mine. He insisted: "Come close, because I'm going to die in a little while and I want to die while looking at a pretty woman."

It's not that I'm pretty, but to him, at that moment, I seemed pretty. He never complained. He didn't speak again. He didn't have the strength to. I admired his courage.

He died.

I felt as much sorrow as if he had been a part of my family.

I admire the fortitude of the people of Mexico.

I stayed at the Red Cross until 11 P.M. I went home and I couldn't sleep. Since then, I go to the Red Cross every day; I do what I can, I talk to the patients a lot, I take them what they ask for; sometimes a lipstick for chapped lips, some flowers. A jar of Vaporub.

Five thousand sandwiches, 350 large pots of rice and 500 pots of beans, a tremendous amount of clothes, came from just seven houses in the Paseo de la Reforma Avenue, near Palmas, in the

Lomas section, the area that was once known as “Chapultepec Heights.” “Nothing happened to me.” “What about you? Did your house collapse?” “No, but the building that my husband owns downtown has a lot of cracks in it.” In Contreras, Coyoacán, Mixcoac, Olivar del Conde, in the Pedregal, Tlalpan, San Angel, Lomas de Tecamachalco, Las Arboledas, nothing happened; the hilly, high, tree-shaded zones of the enclosed gardens were safe. However, many of the ladies who own houses there did not limit themselves to making sandwiches, boiling water, or preparing face masks, to going to the shelters or emptying out their medicine cabinets, to sending their chauffeurs with loads of supplies: they also went to the disaster areas. One of the ladies from Las Lomas:

I’m a volunteer in the Medical Center, and I immediately went there. I parked the car where I could because the area was full of rubble and I began to see people, all bloody, running, a terrible spectacle on Cuauhtemoc Avenue—above all, the screams, I still hear them at night, and I thought to myself: “It’s a good thing that the Medical Center is so close and can take care of all the people who have been injured.” I ran too. When I got there, I was taken aback. The Medical Center, the most important hospital complex in Latin America, the pride of Mexican medicine, had crumbled. Not even in my worst nightmares could I have imagined these war scenes. Worse than a bombing; in the midst of the dust and the horrible stench of gas, had begun the evacuation of 2,900 patients of one of the hospitals.

I saw a stretcher being pulled out of a hole with patient on it, he still had his oxygen unit and IV. The patients were very frightened. Many of them were crying, the nurses were soothing them: “It’s all over, it’s over”; they embraced them. Their discipline, their commitment, was *incredible!* I didn’t know it but the tears were running down my face; I cried all the time. The Medical Center was evacuated in less than three hours. Many boy scouts arrived with amazing speed and began to help with the stretchers and to carry the patients.

Of course, we had to make a list so that we would know who they were and where we were sending them; at that moment, there wasn’t a notebook or a piece of paper to write on, I wrote down a lot of the names on a kleenex, what anguish! The patients who could walk on their own or had been programmed for an operation, or the ones who were about to be released by their doctors were there, barefoot, in their little hospital gowns. They cried and pleaded with us:

“Could you please call my family and ask them to bring me some clothes and pick me up?”

Obviously, there were no telephones or anything, so then it came time for me to go to the corner and ask any car that passed on the street:

“Mister, please, this patient has to get home; we’ve just evacuated the hospital, please.”

The taxi drivers, the car owners, answered without hesitation:

“Don’t worry.”

They asked the patient:

“What’s your name?”

“My name is such and such.”

“Well, don’t worry, I’ll take you and deliver you to your relatives. I don’t know if it will take an hour or a day, but don’t worry, I’ll get you there.”

To me they would say:

“I’ll get him to his family, guaranteed, don’t you worry.”

And so I would go to the the Medical Center for another patient, get another vehicle, write down the name of the person and the patient would get into the car. Fine, but what about the children? We started to put them in groups so that they would all go to the same hospital. We sat on the rubble to make our lists. I’m never going to forget the suffering of the people around the Medical Center, trying to find out where their relatives were.

These are some of the voices that make up the oral history, the communal memory of the earthquake that occurred on September 19th, 1985. In the strictest sense, oral history is almost always related to the vanquished, the defeated, the earth’s forsaken ones, that is, the people. Oral history walks side by side with defeat, not victory. Victory is the space of biography. The winner dictates his life or writes it himself: autobiography. Furthermore, oral history not only shares the fate of the vanquished, but is also born at the moment of disaster and of collective social forgetfulness, (It is easy in Latin American countries to erase the poor, to make the visible invisible), it corresponds to the desire to oppose the injustice which is committed in forgetting.

At the beginning of my journalistic endeavor, I went to jail to interview the inmates. For one reason: the prisoners are always there; their feelings are always close to the surface and they are willing to talk. Upon finding themselves in an unfavorable situation, they try to justify their former lives, they go back to their past, to their memories and their memories are “the only freedom they have,” as Carlos Monsivais states.

At the moment of a tragedy as enormous as that of the earthquake of the 19th of September, all citizens feel like outcasts. The earthquake abolished all values. The very foundations of life itself fell amid the rubble, each man and each woman improvises his conduct, attempts a new communication with the others; demolishes barriers and prejudices. It is an exceptional event, conduct must

therefore be exceptional as well. It is the representative of the under-classes, speaks for them, allies itself to the most relegated social classes. "From the morning of September the 19th, the volunteers turned solidarity into an optimum instrument for the creation of new civil spaces", states Carlos Monsivaís.

On the 19th of September, the traditional vision of Mexico shattered. People asked themselves: "Where have we settled, whom have we entrusted the safety of our homes to, what are the real conditions of the drainage system, the distribution network, the water system?" Carlos Monsivaís, present from the very first moment, is both the witness and main chronicler of all the phases of the tragedy and offers this thesis:

Civilian society exists as a great latent need in those who do not even know the term, and its first and most insistent demand is the redistribution of powers. On the 19th of September, the volunteers, the great majority of them youths, who spread out all over the city organizing traffic, creating popular aid groups around the hospital or fallen buildings and participating actively and with bleeding hands in the rescue work, showed the deepest human understanding and revindicated civilian and political functions unknown to them until that moment. They were at the same time police, traffic agents, rescue workers, city councilors, doctors, nurses, congressmen, community leaders, city mayors.

For this reason, the full sense of the epic actions of Thursday the 19th, will not be seriously examined as long as it is confined exclusively to the concept of "solidarity". On the 19th and in response to the victims Mexico City underwent one of the noblest changes of power in its history and which greatly transcended the limits of mere solidarity; the transformation of the people into a government, and of what had been declared officially a disorder into civilian order.

Oral history also gives sudden importance to those who were rejected before, to those relegated to anonymity. For this reason, it is quite easy for those devoted to the study of oral history to adopt a paternalistic attitude and to feel like saviors. Oral history is always tinted by ideology; anthropologists and sociologists, when they become the spokesman of the dispossessed, ally themselves like the working priests (*Prêtres Ouvriers*) in their time, to the mass that they give voice to.

If history is a science and literature the enterprise of the imagination, where does that place oral history? Is it the same as testimonial literature? Documenting our country means writing chronicles and essays about the immediate happenings; writing its

real history of the moment. It is important to write down, to rescue; later will come others who will give the interpretation; the ones who will obtain the criteria and the conclusions. The immediate history is oral history and its richness will be used by the analysts to launch theories. Ricardo Pezas, Miguel Barnet, Oscar Lewis, Truman Capote are at a given moment reporters, chroniclers of a cathartic experience, but of course, their informers select the material they will give them, because memory has a selective attitude and each human being coordinates his life structure in relation to his interests; he doesn't remember what is not important for him.

In writing a book on the earthquake, "Human Interest" stories can be written, but how solve the problem of the repetition of human experience when the psychological response of each human being is never the same? The case of Andres Escote, who lost his only brother, Alejandro, who had entered Chapultepec University on the 17th of September, a school that collapsed, is an example. Andres Escote assured me that he felt perfectly well and that these were the good vibrations sent by his little brother Alejandro. When I heard him I thought of the many ways that we humans have of dealing with pain and that one of these was his petrified smile, his eyes like the eyes of a beaten animal. "Perfect, I'm perfect", repeated Andres Escote again and again, assuring me that he wanted to pass on the "good vibes" to everyone, as well as the lessons of El Lobo [The Wolf], as he called his brother Alejandro Escote, dead three days after entering a badly built university in the Roma neighborhood, the Universidad Chapultepec, which buried him along with other students who had gone into their first class, at seven in the morning.

A different attitude from that of Andres Escote was that of two mothers, Judith Garca, who lost her husband and three small children, and Gloria Guerrere, who lost her daughter; both of them directly blamed our corruption.

The inability to blame Nature makes the grudge all that more intense; much of the powerlessness is transformed into an anti-government feeling. With this knowledge as the starting point, how can responsibilities be separated? I remember that in 1968, while writing *La Noche de Tlatelolco*, about the student movement, the person responsible for the massacre of October 2nd was the President, Gustavo Diaz Ordaz, as he declared in his fifth State of the

Union address. In the case of the earthquake, although corruption is directly responsible, as stated by Gloria Guerrere along with other angry voices of protest of the people who lived in the *Nuevo León* building in the *Tlatelolco* complex, bad government can defend itself and argue that the accusations are the product of momentary powerlessness and hysteria.

How to pinpoint, how to distinguish how much is still spontaneous in the testimonies obtained up to ten days later?

How to set down the tonalities of each person in apparently identical situations?

If anguish, fear of death, and solidarity are practically inexpressible, how and in what manner can they be described?

How can solidarity, at a given moment, transcend impotence, and on the other hand, how can collective impotence be a rein on solidarity? 1968 and 1985 are two borderline experiences for oral history: one, the birth of a popular student movement, which grew stronger and stronger until its final crushing, and second, popular response to a natural phenomenon, such as the earthquake of the 19th of September. In both cases, the problem is definitely a matter of conscience. Engineer Francisco de la Torre, who helped rescue some of the bodies of the six hundred seamstresses who died buried in the rubble and whose families stayed for a whole month at San Antonio Abad, confirms it:

“My family is not wealthy, my parents weren’t and aren’t, I would never have been able to go to the University except for the system in which we live. My way of paying my country back is to help the people here while they wait for their dead; rescuing them is also my homage to the dead.”

“Thanks to all those people who died, to people like these you see waiting here, walking here, many of us have a profession,” says Francisco de la Torre.

Thanks to these people, I’m an engineer and you’re a journalist and the President is President, therefore, I’m not here as a bureaucrat, staying only eight hours, but rather, as long as I’m needed, as long as my body holds out. I think that all of us who are here day and night are completely aware that we must work until we collapse from exhaustion.

Another testimony is that of Cuauhtemec Abarca, the leader of the *Coordinadora Unica de Damnificados* (Coordinating Committee of the Victims of the Earthquake):

On the fifth night, maybe on the fourth, the team from the United States came to the Nuevo León building. It was a very touching moment. At about 2 or 3 in the morning, they stopped all machines, the cranes, caterpillars, and distributed their sensors throughout the ruins.

The specialists asked that a patrol car park in front of the rubble and over the sound system talk to the possible survivors.

The patrolman began saying:

“Attention survivors of entrance C as in Charles, please knock ten times.”

The detectors registered—on a kind of electrocardiogram—the slightest sound.

“Attention survivors of entrance D as in Day, please knock ten times”

Then they told them to knock five times, then three and then again ten times, the same as for those in entrance C as in Charles. It was very late at night and very dark. The voice could be heard very clearly.

“Attention survivors of entrance F as in false . . .”

We were all in suspense; for an hour and a half the machines continued their register. They got tiny signals but thanks to those signals many survivors trapped between the walls were rescued from entrances C, D, E, and F. Since I speak English, the American technicians asked me to translate for them a message that was read by the patrolman, and I’m never going to forget these words:

“Survivors, we know that you are there, don’t despair, we’re working and we’re going to get you out.”

Goodness, everyone was hugging and crying, we were all hugging each other.

The Americans who detected the sounds, where they came from, helped us rescue twenty three persons alive, from the areas in which the sensors had registered the noises. They gave instructions as to where to dig and how to make tunnels.

I had been at the *Nuevo León* from 7:30 on September 19th, eleven minutes after it fell. I live 10 meters away, my building is the one next to it. I began to go in any way I could, following the screams. I yelled as hard as I could: “Is anybody there?” The screams were terrifying.

From the tenth floor we rescued a Down Syndrome child about 14 years old, maybe 15; he was completely buried, only his head stuck out, his skull. Moving him was awful because each time we moved something, it seemed to press on him; we didn’t know the situation he was in because he couldn’t communicate well; after an hour of working with him, he told us in his garbled tongue that his little sister was under him and finally we were able to get him out, don’t ask me how, and then the little girl, unharmed, not a scratch, nothing, just covered with dirt, a little girl about four or five years old.

Someone told me: “Hey, Cuauhtemec, it smells like gas,” yeah, really, the stench was awful because the pipes broke and the gas stayed there, but it didn’t occur to me that the electricity might be connected

and that made it a greater risk. We realized that the cables had electricity, that it hadn't been out, when I tried to move one and it gave me a shock. So we started to pass the word: "The cables are live, don't touch them." Besides everything was wet because there was an enormous amount of broken pipes. We didn't even have gloves to grab the steel beams and the rocks with; pretty soon, my hands were bleeding, it was exasperating, we were literally working with our nails; people started arriving with buckets, pots, kitchen utensils and with a pot I began to get the debris out, the same impotence; how could we make any progress if we had no tools to work with?

I imagine that oral history is like those signals that the sensors detected under the layers of concrete and the beams that covered the survivors. Those voices are intertwined to make up the unique and plural voice of the anonymous suffering mass, the voice of those who have no voice, the voice of oral history. Those who rescue that voice rescue the past and help explain the present; those who rescue the present, help to forge hope; they throw aside individuality in order to form part of collectivity. They speak of a person and especially of a time. They speak of a person and a historic event. And it is historic events that can sometimes radically change the spirit of people. The student movement of 1968 and the earthquake of 1985 are collective, epic events, reconstructed through the memory of actors, legitimate actors. They will leave a deep mark in the psychology of all Mexicans, as did the conquest, and as the Revolution of 1910 did before, when it killed a million Mexicans.